

EXTREME SKIING

There are no safety bars on the chairlifts and no windows in the dorm - but Alta does have the 'Greatest Snow on Earth'

If God had been a skier, then on the eighth day he might have created the Wasatch Range. Both he and it loom large in Salt Lake City, home to the Mormon Church and what Utah's state slogan calls the "Greatest Snow on Earth". Pacific storms that suck moisture from the lake, having whipped east across bone-dry Nevada, have only one option when they swirl to a halt over this natural snow machine - to dump epic quantities of the kind of feather-light powder off-piste skiers dream about.

And if there's a place that can claim the greatest snow in Utah, it is the tiny town at the head of Little Cottonwood Canyon, where those storms discharge the last of their frozen loads. Alta, which lies 25 miles outside Salt Lake, received 700 inches of snow last winter - enough, if it fell all at once,

to bury a stack of four double-decker buses. Resorts in the Alps would be happy with half that amount.

In its first incarnation, Alta was a magnet for 19th-century miners seeking silver and respite from Mormon austerity. Reached, as it still is, via the cliffs they call Hellgate, the town was a den of booze, brothels and wild West shoot-outs.

By the 1930s, prospectors and pick-axemen had given way to skiers in pursuit of more bewitching gems - stashes of powder so deep that locals speak of needing snorkels to ski. Seven of us make the journey to this oasis of sleeps and deeps. I join my brother, Patrick, and a crew of American

college buddies headed by Abe, a former Alta resident as adept with his supply of rolling papers as his fat powder skis.

The draw of the snow and some of the most challenging terrain in the US ought to have made Alta one of the world's best-known resorts, but locals' resistance to developers means time ticks more slowly here. A mile from the mega-hotels of neighbouring Snowbird, Alta, which forbids snowboarding, attracts pilgrims happy to eschew the frumpieries of modern skiing, boasting little more than a few chairlifts (no safety bars), a car park and a handful of lodges. None channels the

retro ethos better than the Snowpine, which steps down into the valley from its shed-like entrance in an avalanche of stone, timber and moth-eaten fixtures. Service comes with a smile - and homefires, the potato accompaniment to every breakfast. My advice: bring slippers and something for heartburn.

With as many as 12 men airing their socks and breakfasts in our windowless dorm, things get pretty fragrant. But, cheap beer notwithstanding, Alta is deathly quiet at night. Après ski starts in the Snowpine's outdoor hot-tub. Dinner (set menu, shared tables) comes with the 6.30pm bell. Nobody is awake after 10pm, guests come to ski and to ski hard.

'ALTA RECEIVED 700 INCHES OF SNOW LAST WINTER - ENOUGH TO BURY FOUR BUSES'

Sod's law means that when we make the journey to Alta, London receives more snow than the Wasatch. We get the odd half-foot dump - fun, but not enough for the waist-deep, face-shot skiing the place is renowned for. But after a few days exploring the area around the resort, we rent touring skis and skins, allowing us to hike through deep snow and up steep inclines. Liberated from the lift system, Abe leads us up the valley behind the Snowpine to Emma Ridge. "Dude," he offers as we scan the steep, north-facing pitch on the other side. "That is sick." Abe is right - one by one we drop, whooping as our wide skis scythe through the pristine powder. It's worth the climb and we skin up and ski down, skipping lunch until our legs beg for mercy. Over beers and fist-bumps in the hot-tub, we celebrate a great day in Utah (or "YOU-taw", as it demands to be pronounced). To get those fabbed Alta face-shots, I guess we'll just have to come back. **Damn. Simon Usborne**

For more information: alta.com. Beds at the Snowpine (thesnowpine.com) start at £50 per person per night, including breakfast and dinner. The author used skis supplied by Storm (stormskis.com)



Case Study: The Independent on Sunday newspaper/independent.co.uk

- Utah coverage

Direct Result of a Press Trip – Simon Usborne

- **Profile:** The Independent is one of the leading Sunday national newspapers
- **Circulation:** 156,517
- **Readership:** 391,292
- **Page Size:** 2/3 colour page plus web coverage
- **Media Value:** \$27,595.39